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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 CARACAS 000124

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SUBJECT: CHAVEZ PREPARING FOR STATE AND LOCAL ELECTIONS

REF: CARACAS 000097

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Classified By: POLITICAL COUNSELOR ROBERT DOWNES,
REASONS 1.4 (B) AND (D)

¶11. (C) Summary. President Chavez is urging his supporters to unite in preparation for gubernatorial elections in 22 states and mayoral elections in over 300 municipalities in late ¶2008. However, during his January 27 "Alo, Presidente" broadcast, Chavez threatened to expel any of his supporters who runs for office prior to getting the official nomination from his new United Socialist Party of Venezuela (PSUV). Chavez is trying to put a lid on intense and divisive intra-PSUV competition in many states and municipalities as well as to continue to try to direct even the smallest details of his administration. Patria Para Todos, an electoral ally of the PSUV, nevertheless announced 16 candidates for state and local races on January 28. Chavez and the PSUV still appear to be in a good position to carry a large majority of the gubernatorial and mayoral races, but even modest gains by the opposition will be perceived as a political setback to Chavez. End Summary.

Chavez Demands PSUV Unity

¶12. (SBU) Since the defeat of his proposed constitutional reforms in the December 2007 referendum, President Chavez has urged his supporters repeatedly to regroup and prepare for the gubernatorial and mayoral elections to be held by November 2008. Chavez continues to warn his supporters that they need to work hard to avoid defeat in key races. During his January 27 broadcast of "Alo, Presidente," Chavez criticized local leaders of the PSUV for prematurely launching campaigns for state and local office. Chavez and said they should withdraw their candidacies or face expulsion from the PSUV.

¶13. (SBU) During the same "Alo, Presidente" broadcast, Chavez spoke via video link to former Vice President and PSUV organizer Jorge Rodriguez and the over 1600 delegates participating in the PSUV founding congress in Barquisimeto. Chavez stressed that the PSUV bases would select the party's candidates and reiterated his intention to seek electoral alliances with Patria Para Todos (PPT) and the Communist Party (PCV) as part of a "Patriotic Pole". He specifically warned that pro-government candidates could potentially lose important elections in Caracas and the states of Miranda, Aragua, Carabobo, Anzoategui, Zulia, Tachira, Bolivar, and

Monagas.

¶4. (SBU) Chavez said that if the opposition wins the country's most important mayorships, "2009 will be a year of war." He asserted that the opposition would "come after him," just as in the short-lived coup of 2002. Chavez insisted, just as he did in the constitutional referendum campaign, that the PSUV is fighting a battle against an "unelected" opposition that is being supported by the United States. Chavez also used the occasion to assert that he, unlike some PSUV, leaders is not engaged in a "personal project." However, a short while later he reiterated his interest in holding a referendum in January 2010 on eliminating presidential term limits.

Signs of Pro-Government Disunity

¶5. (C) Chavez' call for PSUV unity comes in the wake of intense jockeying among PSUV leaders for state and local offices. Local media are reporting that over 100 PSUV members have announced their "pre-candidacies" for state and local offices. Over 20 PSUV members of the National Assembly are reportedly openly seeking governorships. National Assembly Deputy Francisco Torrealba told the Ambassador January 26 that he is one of over a dozen PSUV aspirants to replace the two-term, pro-government governor of Portuguesa State. Torrealba said he would likely make way for another prominent (but unspecified) PSUV candidate who is polling somewhat better than him in preliminary state polls.

¶6. (SBU) In President Chavez' home state of Barinas, two of Chavez' brothers are reportedly battling to replace Chavez' father, the two-term governor of the state. Argenis Chavez holds a senior state position in his father's government and Anibal Chavez is the two-term mayor of a Barinas

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municipality. Complicating PSUV unity further, Julio Cesar Reyes, mayor of Barinas city, is also reportedly interested in the governorship. In Monagas State, the sitting pro-Chavez governor Jose Gregorio "The Cat" Briceno, is reportedly seeking a second term. However, Maturin Mayor Numa Rojas, a PSUV hard-liner who has been openly feuding with the governor for a couple of years, may also run.

¶7. (C) Despite Chavez' public call for unity, Patria Para Todos (PPT), one of the PSUV's prospective coalition partners, held a January 28 press conference to announce 16 "pre-candidates". National Assembly Second Vice-President Jose Albornoz, for example, is planning to run for governor of Guarico, a state that then PPT candidate Eduardo Manuitt carried in 2004 (Note: Manuitt left PPT in 2006 to join the PSUV). Asked whether the PPT's announcement violated Chavez' ban on "premature candidatures," a PPT spokesman said "This is the PPT, not the PSUV." Albornoz told PolCouns in the past that his party leaders' desire to select their own candidates was one of the main reasons PPT did not join the PSUV. PPT and PCV leaders say they are still planning to forge electoral alliances with the PSUV.

Comment

¶8. (C) The 2008 gubernatorial and mayoral elections are making public long-standing internal divisions within Chavismo. This is the first time that many two-term pro-Chavez governors and mayors may not run due to term limits leaving the political field open to a bevy of new aspirants. There are also widespread rumors that Chavez intends to name new candidates to replace governors and mayors widely perceived as being ineffective or corrupt. Passed-over incumbents, however, may be inclined to run as independents, thus splitting Chavez votes. Additionally,

candidates from both the ostracized Podemos party and PPT could potentially split votes among Chavez supporters in a couple of swing states.

¶ 9. (C) Nevertheless, President Chavez stands a better chance of imposing single pro-government candidates in state and local races than the fractious opposition does in reaching consensus to promote unity candidates. At this stage, the PSUV is still likely to win a strong majority of the 22 gubernatorial and over 300 mayoral races. Even modest gains by the opposition, however, will be widely perceived as a political setback to Chavez. The opposition is also beginning negotiations to determine unified candidates but will likely face fierce internal debate (Reftel). The opposition will also need to start organizing observers and witnesses if they hope to defend the vote.

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